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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIAN OPPOSITION LEADERS VOICE CONCERNS ABOUT
ELECTION PROCESS TO U/S OTERO

Classified By: Under CDA John Yates for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

Summary

11. (C) Leaders of the opposition Forum for Justice and Democratic Dialogue (Forum) coalition told Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs Maria Otero they had little confidence that Ethiopia's May election will be free or fair, and complained that their party activists are being harassed and imprisoned. The foreign relations head of the All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP), which helped draft the recently enacted electoral Code of Conduct (CoC), shared this lack of confidence in the election process but added that his party has had a reasonably positive experience working with the ruling party through the mechanisms established by the CoC.

12. (C) The opposition leaders urged the U.S. to publicly condemn what they viewed as a closing of political space in Ethiopia and to privately push the Government of Ethiopia (GoE) to address this issue. U/S Otero replied that the U.S. recognizes that political space in Ethiopia has become increasingly restricted and assured them that the U.S. would continue to press the GoE to ensure a truly free and transparent election, adding that senior USG officials were watching Ethiopia closely. Otero further encouraged the group to provide specific examples of harassment and intimidation of opposition candidates that the U.S. and international community could raise with the GoE. End summary.

13. (SBU) Visiting Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs Maria Otero met with opposition leaders on February 1 for 60 minutes. The Forum coalition was represented by three senior leaders: Bulcha Demeksa, Member of Parliament, Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) Chairman, Forum Co-Chair; Beyene Petros, Member of Parliament, United Ethiopian Democratic Force (UEDF) Chairman, Forum Co-Chair; Seeye Abraha, Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) Vice Chairman, Forum Co-Chair. Yaicob Like, All Ethiopia Unity Party (AEUP) Foreign Relations Chair, also participated. The U.S. was also represented by NSC Senior Director for African Affairs Michelle Gavin, DCM Tulinabo Mushingi, Pol/Econ Chief Kirk McBride, Otero Special Advisor Nicole Goldin, Otero Special Assistant Caroline Mauldin, and PolOff Skye Justice (notetaker).

Forum Leaders Share Grim Election Outlook

¶4. (C) Bulcha Demeksa, of the Forum, told U/S Otero that several of his party's candidates had been recently detained by authorities, despite GoE claims that there are no political prisoners in Ethiopia. The GoE will hold an election in name only, he said, and there is no excitement surrounding the election because everyone knows the status quo will not change. Bulcha said "foreign observers should have arrived two months ago," and criticized the European Union and African Union for yielding to GoE demands that they come later than originally scheduled. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has officials and informants from senior ranks of government all the way down to the family level, he said, and the people are afraid to challenge the ruling party. Bulcha criticized the recently enacted CoC as protecting the rights of only certain political parties, and said the Forum would prefer that only the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) govern the electoral process, rather than the structure established by the CoC. (Comment: The AEUP decision to engage the EPRDF and sign the CoC generated considerable animosity between its leaders and those of the Forum. This tension was evident during U/S Otero's meeting, as in Bulcha's comment on the Forum's disdain for the CoC, but the parties remained cordial throughout. End comment.)

¶5. (C) Seeye Abraha, also representing the Forum, noted the continued imprisonment of his UDJ party chairwoman Birtukan Midekssa, and expressed regret that "while the government purports to promote women's rights, it treats women who actually speak out for their rights with extraordinary brutality." He acknowledged that Ethiopia is one of the most

ADDIS ABAB 00000328 002 OF 003

stable countries in the Horn of Africa, but stressed that "security without democracy is not sustainable." Seeye said holding an election in the absence of respect for human rights, the rule of law, freedom of the press, and freedom of movement - as he assessed was the case in Ethiopia - is meaningless.

¶6. (C) Beyene Petros, also of the Forum, said the GoE's promises to engage in free, democratic discourse have been revealed as meaningless. In 2005, "the door was opened slightly, but has since been slammed shut." After that election, Beyene said, the GoE systematically enacted laws and restrictive parliamentary procedures, such as drastically reducing time limits for member presentations. Procedurally, he added, the EPRDF has made dialogue impossible. "My constituents paid dearly to get me elected," Beyene said, "and what to I give them back? Nothing. I cannot even speak on their behalf."

¶7. (C) Beyene added that he joined the Forum hoping that the EPRDF would negotiate on a broad range of electoral issues, but he has lost hope. The NEBE and public election observers are not independent, he said, but rather were previously registered members of the EPRDF. Foreign observers cannot hope to monitor the entire country, Beyene said, and opposition parties have insufficient access to the media. He said "EPRDF cadres in Eastern Wolaita" (Oromia Region) beat and vandalized the cars of Forum leaders - all senior parliamentarians - attempting to register candidates (septel). Beyene described the electoral process as "a fiasco staged for international consumption," and said the result would be the same as the 2008 local elections (in which the ruling party won over 99 percent of contested seats) unless the GoE makes a dramatic course correction.

AEUP Describes Modest Success with Code of Conduct

¶8. (C) Yaicob Like of AUPEP, the largest opposition party to sign the CoC, had a different perspective. Yaicob said his party's experience working with the EPRDF under the CoC had "not been bad." After signing, AEUP submitted a list of 208 political prisoners to the Joint Council of Political Parties

established by the CoC, and 118 of them have since been released. He added, however, that harassment and imprisonment of party members has continued. (Comment: When discussing the complaints his party had registered under the CoC, Yaicob referred to the Joint Council, EPRDF, and GoE almost interchangeably. End comment.)

¶9. (C) According to Yaicob, AEUP's office directors in the Amhara and Afar regions were recently beaten and imprisoned by EPRDF supporters and EPRDF-controlled security forces. He said the EPRDF was cordial in reaction to AEUP complaints about these incidents but slow to act. As a result of these experiences, AEUP formed a committee with the Joint Council/EPRDF to travel to Amhara and investigate specific cases. He said the EPRDF had acknowledged that 95 percent of the AEUP complaints were meritorious and the two parties resolved them on the spot with only two party members in the region remaining in detention. Yaicob further noted that while his party has generally received sympathetic responses to its complaints from senior officials in Addis Ababa, those responses do not always translate to action outside the capital.

Forum Leaders Criticize U.S. Reaction to Abuses, Urge Action

¶10. (C) AEUP's Yaicob told Otero and Gavin that given an opening, the Ethiopian people are ready for change. In the past, he said, change has come quickly in Ethiopia, and with little formal organization. The 2005 election should prove to anyone that change is possible. The AEUP, he said, is ready to move forward under the CoC, and will hold the EPRDF to its commitments. The Forum's Beyene expressed concern with what he perceived as a U.S. message that change does not come overnight, noting that Ethiopians have been waiting for change for 35 years. The CoC "is merely window dressing," he said, and negotiation to date with the opposition has not been genuine, but undertaken by the EPRDF as the easiest means to seem cooperative without actually making substantive

ADDIS ABAB 00000328 003 OF 003

concessions.

¶11. (C) The Forum's Seeye said it was unfortunate that the world, and the U.S. in particular, were not speaking out about the abuses of the GoE. He reiterated that the Forum promotes peaceful change, but noted that other groups in Ethiopia are willing to overthrow the government by violent means. By participating in the elections, Seeye said, the Forum risks exposing its members to the same violent treatment they received in 2005. He urged the U.S. to continue pushing Meles to open political space in order to allow the Ethiopian people to participate in the elections without fear. He warned that the GoE was interested not in holding free elections but in legitimizing their rule, and the U.S. was perceived by the GoE as the main legitimizer. The Forum's Bulcha acknowledged that the U.S. "can't order a sovereign state to do anything," but urged the U.S. to take stronger action, given its status in Ethiopia. "You should speak out publicly," he said, adding: "People here want to know what President Obama thinks about Ethiopia. Even now, we don't know what the Obama administration thinks about our country."

¶12. (C) In response, U/S Otero told the assembled opposition leaders that the U.S. recognized that political space in Ethiopia was increasingly restricted, and those restrictions would likely continue until after the election. The Obama administration is working to open political space in Ethiopia and all over the world, she said, and our discussion with the GoE and EPRDF are by no means limited to security. Otero noted that during a two-hour meeting the U.S. delegation (to the AU Summit) had held with Prime Minister Meles the previous day, three-quarters of the discussion had focused on democracy. She assured the opposition that the U.S. would continue to press the GoE to open political space, and that

senior State Department and administration officials were watching Ethiopia closely. Otero encouraged the group to provide specific examples of harassment and intimidation of opposition candidates that the U.S. and international community could raise with the GoE. NSC Africa Director Gavin quoted President Obama's Accra speech, relaying that governance is the keystone of U.S.-Africa relations, and other U.S. interests in Africa cannot be sustained without good governance.

¶13. (U) U/S Otero and NSC Director Gavin have cleared this message.

YATES